Lea P. Stewart's Commentary on "Informing Employees About Layoffs"

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Informing Employees About Layoffs

One of the hardest parts of any manager's job is laying off or firing employees. In this case, Arnold Raskin, Vice-President of Manufacturing, faced this difficulty by delegating this task to Tony Furillo. At first glance, it would be easy to blame Arnold for the resulting problems because he would not accept the responsibility himself. On the other hand, Tony is in close contact with the employees he supervises and, although it is never easy to be laid off, the message might have been a bit easier to handle coming from someone the employees knew will. Nevertheless, Arnold gave Tony the assignment, but Tony declined to carry out his task on the day before Christmas.

Tony delayed a difficult task. Because of this delay, an employee learned of the layoffs in an inappropriate manner (during a church service) and another employee placed a $500.00 nonrefundable deposit on a trip that she may not be able to afford. Tony did not want to be a Scrooge. His seemingly charitable act, however, resulted in a great deal of unhappiness--perhaps in more unhappiness that would have happened if he announced the layoffs on Christmas eve.

Tony bases his decision on the golden rule. He claims that "if it were me, I sure wouldn't want my Christmas spoiled." He is reasoning that he should do unto others as he would have them do unto him. He does not think he would want someone to spoil his Christmas, so he does not inform any of the employees of the layoffs. Of course, the assumption here is that having a happy Christmas is the most important thing to be considered in this situation. He never thinks past Christmas to consider how this situation will affect the rest of the employees' lives. He assumes that letting them have one happy day will somehow ameliorate the terrible news they will receive after Christmas.

This type of reasoning is very paternalistic. Tony assumes that he knows what is best for his employees. He thinks that he would want an unspoiled Christmas, so he projects this wish onto his employees. He does not consider that they may hear the information in other ways or that they may make financial decisions based on the assumption that their jobs are secure. Of course, we can all sympathize with someone who has to tell his employees on the day before Christmas that they are being laid off, but Tony cannot assume that the news will be any easier to take after Christmas.

Although Tony had a variety of what he thought were charitable reasons for his actions, his behavior was, in fact, lying. Sissela Bok provides an excellent analysis of this phenomenon in her book, Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life. Bok reminds us that lying may harm the people being lied to, but it can also harm the liar. In this case, Tony is clearly harmed by withholding information about the layoffs (his lie). Not only is Arnold angry with him, but Tony must also face the workers after Christmas. It will be especially difficult to face them since at least one of them already knows the situation. In addition, one of them is likely to hold him responsible for her decision to book a vacation and the potential loss of money that could result if she cannot afford it after being laid off. Thus, lying (withholding information) harms Tony as well as his employees.

Tony decided to base his actions on an accepted ethical principle--the golden rule. The resulting problems in this case do not negate this principle. The problem in this situation is that Tony made his decision without considering the full ramifications of the situation. The situation is not as simple as ruining Christmas versus not ruining Christmas. Many other factors need to be considered. For example, would Tony have wanted to learn about his layoff in a casual conversation at church on Christmas eve? Would he have liked to have decided to spend a considerable amount of money without knowing that he would be laid off? The golden rule is an ethical principle that can be effectively applied only if we truly know the full meaning of the situation to ourselves and to others.